

# VU Research Portal

## The problem of moral luck: An argument against its epistemic reduction

Schinkel, A.

### **published in**

Ethical Theory and Moral Practice  
2009

### **DOI (link to publisher)**

[10.1007/s10677-009-9153-y](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10677-009-9153-y)

### **document version**

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

### **citation for published version (APA)**

Schinkel, A. (2009). The problem of moral luck: An argument against its epistemic reduction. *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 12(3), 267-277. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10677-009-9153-y>

### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

### **E-mail address:**

[vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl](mailto:vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl)

# The Problem of Moral Luck: An Argument Against its Epistemic Reduction

Anders Schinkel

Accepted: 12 January 2009 / Published online: 12 February 2009  
© Springer Science + Business Media B.V. 2009

**Abstract** Whom I call ‘epistemic reductionists’ in this article are critics of the notion of ‘moral luck’ that maintain that all supposed cases of moral luck are illusory; they are in fact cases of what I describe as a special form of epistemic luck, the only difference lying in what we get to know about someone, rather than in what (s)he deserves in terms of praise or blame. I argue that epistemic reductionists are mistaken. They implausibly separate judgements of character from judgements concerning acts, and they assume a conception of character that is untenable both from a common sense perspective and with a view to findings from social psychology. I use especially the example of Scobie, the protagonist of Graham Greene’s novel *The Heart of the Matter*, to show that moral luck is real—that there are cases of moral luck that cannot be reduced to epistemic luck. The reality of moral luck, in this example at least, lies in its impact on character and personal and moral identity.

**Keywords** Moral luck · Epistemic luck · Character · Graham Greene

The problem of moral luck: an argument against its epistemic reduction

“He thought: so all this need not have happened. If Louise had stayed I should never have loved Helen. I would never have been blackmailed by Yusef, never have committed that act of despair. I would have been myself still—the same self that lay stacked in fifteen years of diaries, not this broken cast.”

GRAHAM GREENE, *The Heart of the Matter*

---

A. Schinkel (✉)  
Faculty of Psychology and Education, VU University Amsterdam, Van der Boechorststraat 1,  
1081 BT Amsterdam, The Netherlands  
e-mail: a.schinkel@psy.vu.nl

## 1 Introduction

A lot has been written about ‘moral luck’ since Bernard Williams and Thomas Nagel published their papers bearing that title.<sup>1</sup> The broad idea of what moral luck is or is supposed to be is generally agreed upon; many adopt Nagel’s definition (1983: 26):

“Where a significant aspect of what someone does depends on factors beyond his control, yet we continue to treat him in that respect as an object of moral judgment, it can be called moral luck.”

But others employ a slightly different concept of moral luck, expressing a different perspective and other interests. Claudia Card (1996: ix), for instance, says:

“Moral luck is luck that impacts either on character development or on one’s ability to do morally good or right things in particular contexts.”

Margaret Urban Walker (Coyne) (1993: 236) distinguishes three positions regarding moral luck: 1) ‘moral luck is real and constitutes a paradox in morality’; 2) ‘moral luck is illusory’; 3) ‘moral luck is real and not paradoxical’.<sup>2</sup> The first is the position taken by Williams and Nagel (and many others who followed them), the second is that of critics like Jensen, Rescher, Richards, Thomson and Zimmerman (all in Statman [ed.] (1993)), as well as Pritchard (2006), and the third is Walker’s own (also in Coyne (1985)), which is shared by Card (1996) and (to a certain extent) Athanassoulis (2005).<sup>3</sup> Authors who take the third position tend to emphasize the connection between moral luck and persons’ character or (moral) identity.

My aim in this article is to show that the second position is wrong, and in doing so I will arrive at a position closer to Walker’s. By ‘the second position’ I mean that position according to which moral luck is illusory, because what is supposed to be ‘moral’ luck is in fact just an epistemic matter that makes no real moral difference at all. As Rescher (1993: 155) puts it:

“The difference at hand is not moral but merely epistemic.”

And Richards (1993: 170) writes:

“...*matters beyond the agent’s control* bear on how clearly we see what he deserves – and, thus, on the legitimacy of our treating him in that way. His luck in those matters affects how we ought to treat him, not by changing what he deserves, but by changing the grounds on which we are obliged to judge.”

<sup>1</sup> They were originally published in the *Aristotelian Society Supplementary* of 1976 and republished (with some revisions) in Williams (1981) and Nagel (1983) [first edition 1979].

<sup>2</sup> The paradox of moral luck arises from our common notions of control and responsibility. We tend to believe that people are morally responsible only for things (actions, outcomes) that are or were under their control. Insofar as luck determined what happened, responsibility is diminished. At the same time, we cannot get around the fact that neither (all) the antecedents of any of our actions or situations in which we act, nor the antecedents of our own persons, were under our control. All this seems, from our perspective, a matter of luck. Yet we hold on to the idea of moral responsibility, and it seems wise to do so. On the paradox of moral luck, see, for instance, Dickenson (2003: 11–14, 46ff.)

<sup>3</sup> Nussbaum (1995) might also be placed among the adherents to the third position, even if she is not concerned with *moral* luck in a narrow sense.

Statman (1993: 17) neatly summarizes this kind of criticism:

“[L]uck does not affect one’s *deserts* but only our *knowledge* of them. Moral bad luck is not luck in one’s moral status being hurt, but (bad) luck in one’s character becoming transparent to others.”<sup>4</sup>

When I say that this position, which I will call epistemic reductionism, is wrong, I mean that there are at least certain cases of moral luck that are *not* illusory, that are *really* cases of moral luck. Epistemic reductionists are wrong in holding that *all* cases of (supposed) *moral* luck are in fact cases of what can be considered as a special form of *epistemic* luck.<sup>5</sup> It is not the epistemic *status* of the supposedly (but not really) morally (un)lucky that is at stake (that is, it is not that they have acquired knowledge in a fortuitous way), but rather they are (un)lucky in what *others* come to know about them.<sup>6</sup> Epistemic reductionists, then, *deny* that there is such a thing as *moral* luck; they do agree that there is luck involved, but this relates to a purely epistemic matter. The luck a supposedly (but not really) morally lucky person has, concerns what others get to know about him; to be lucky in this sense means that others do not find out what your true moral status is, and believe it to be better than it really is.

Consider the following example. Pete daily commutes by train. Let us say it is a train where one needs to buy a ticket before boarding, because it is not possible to buy a ticket on the train. He never buys a ticket, but so far he has (miraculously) managed to escape the conductor’s attention. Mike seldom travels by train, but one day he does, on the same line as Pete but at another hour, and is caught dodging fares. (He thought he might risk it this one time.) Consequently, he is fined. Mike has been ‘unmasked’ as a fare dodger. Pete, in fact far worse a fare dodger than Mike, has not yet been found out. His moral status—in the eyes of the world, at least—is unblemished. This is a clear case of epistemic luck in the sense outlined above. Circumstances beyond Pete and Mike’s control determine not what they actually *do*, but only whether what they do *becomes known*.

With all this talk about moral and epistemic luck, we should not forget to define ‘luck’. Like most authors on the topic of moral luck, I believe a common-sense definition of luck will suffice. We call something a matter of (good or bad) luck when 1) it is of interest or importance to us, 2) it was not under our control, and 3) we had no reason to expect its occurrence. So I am lucky if I find a twenty pound note on the street, because it is of interest to me, I did not put it there or arrange its being there in some other way, and I did not expect to find it at all, because usually when I walk along the street there are no banknotes to be seen at all.<sup>7</sup>

Epistemic reductionism is explained in more detail in section 3. I distinguish between an ‘impure’ and a ‘pure’ form of epistemic luck. Epistemic reductionists maintain that all cases of moral luck in fact amount to the latter form of epistemic luck. I cast doubt on the plausibility of the epistemic reductionist’s separation of judgements of character from judgements concerning

<sup>4</sup> I should note that it does not have to be one’s character that becomes transparent to others; it may also be the case that people simply find out what one has done.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Concepcion (2002: 458): “Advocates of the epistemic argument for immunity from luck improperly over-generalize its limited conclusion.”

<sup>6</sup> Epistemic luck in the normal sense is defined by Pritchard (2004: 193) as ‘the putative situation in which an agent gains knowledge even though that knowledge has come about in a way that has (...) involved luck in some significant measure’. The epistemic luck I talk about in this article differs from this, in that it does not concern what the (un)lucky person knows, but what others come to know about him.

<sup>7</sup> This ‘definition’ is of course not water-tight, though it will do for the present purpose. What should we say, for instance, when someone else placed the banknote there for me to find it – someone who knew I would walk there at that time of day? Such cases are perhaps better covered by Duncan Pritchard’s more technical definition of luck, which invokes the idea of possible worlds. See Pritchard (2005), 125ff.

acts, and build on this in section 4, where I also draw on findings from social psychology that problematize epistemic reductionists' assumptions about character and its relation to action. In sections 4 and 5 I provide examples to show that there are cases where moral luck cannot be reduced to epistemic luck. One of these, referred to throughout the article, is the example of Scobie, the protagonist of Graham Greene's novel *The Heart of the Matter*. Therefore, I will start by briefly summarizing what this novel is about.

## 2 Outline of Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter*

Major Henry Scobie is a police inspector in a West-African country, during the Second World War. Everything about the climate (in both a literal and a figurative sense) is conducive to corruption, but contrary to what some of the other English residents believe, Scobie is not open to bribery. He is extremely conscientious about his work, although over time he has become more resigned (the result of acting morally amidst people who could not care less about morals). He is a convinced Catholic with a strong sense of morals, and an especially heavy sense of responsibility. Scobie considers his wife Louise's happiness to be one of his main responsibilities. When Scobie is passed over for promotion, Louise cannot bear the shame and wishes to go to South-Africa. Scobie does not have the money, but promises Louise: "I'll manage somehow." Then, for the first time in his career, he breaks the rules out of sympathy with a man (a stranger to Scobie) he should, but decides not to, report. This is the first 'corrupt' deed, the first scratch on Scobie's integrity. 'Corrupt' is Scobie's action at least in his own view, in his self-interpretation. It is exactly his overly legalistic take on things that will lead to real moral shortcomings. The threshold for the next step has been lowered: he borrows money from Yusef, a shady local merchant. For outsiders, it has the appearance of corruption. When Louise is in South-Africa Scobie meets the nineteen-year-old widow Helen. Feelings of responsibility, security, love and friendship are all mixed up. He tries to hide the affair:

"He began to think for both of them, carefully. Like a criminal he began to fashion in his mind the undetectable crime: he planned the moves ahead: he embarked for the first time of his life on the long legalistic arguments of deceit." (Greene 1971: 161)

Slowly, his integrity crumbles until finally, unable to bear both what he takes to be his responsibilities and his sinfulness, he commits suicide. What makes all this all the more unbearable is that some weeks earlier he received the news that he would be promoted after all—news that leads him to the reflection I have used as a motto above this article.

*The Heart of the Matter* is in many ways about the reality of moral (bad) luck. In one place, Scobie himself articulates the view that his virtuousness up to that moment was merely a matter of epistemic luck (see section 3). Yet in various places in *The Heart of the Matter* it becomes clear that this view does not hold—as I intend to demonstrate below. Scobie himself at one point blames God for his 'constitutive luck'<sup>8</sup>: "If you made me, you made this feeling

<sup>8</sup> 'Constitutive luck' is one of four kinds of moral luck first distinguished by Nagel (1983: 28) and later systematized (and named and renamed) by others; it is luck that influences the talents, capacities, and inclinations one has. 'Circumstantial luck' (or 'situational luck') points to the role of circumstances, the situation one is in – for instance, one may be exposed to temptations others will never have to face. 'Causal luck' is 'luck in how one is determined by antecedent circumstances'; 'resultant luck' (or 'consequential luck', 'outcome luck'), finally, is luck in 'the way one's actions and projects turn out'. Card (1996: 2) and Athanassoulis (2005: 24) have rightly observed that constitutive luck has been virtually ignored in the literature. Most attention by far has gone to situational and resultant luck. (Cf. Walker [(1993): 247–248] and Dickenson [(2003): 4].) This might be due to an intuition that the notion of constitutive luck threatens to undermine everything – to do with morality, that is. I believe such an intuition would be incorrect, but I need not go into this here.

of responsibility...” (259). Finally, moral luck figures in a third way: Scobie comes to find himself in a situation in which he cannot but do wrong—in his own eyes, anyway: his sense of responsibility and his pity force him to act the way he does, but his Catholic morality tells him to act otherwise. Two claims are made on Scobie, both in the name of what is right—and this amounts to moral bad luck, for he can only respond to one of these claims.

### 3 The Epistemic Reduction of Moral Luck

Epistemic reductionists hold that what is known as ‘moral luck’ is actually not *moral* luck at all, but rather something we can consider a special form of *epistemic* luck. Luck makes no moral difference—it *cannot* make a moral difference—but it may influence what we come to know about the moral quality of an act or someone’s intentions.<sup>9</sup> (For epistemic reductionists, the moral quality of an act is in fact the same thing as, or else reducible to, the moral quality of the intentions behind the act or the character of the actor—except in so far as the actor was negligent, should have foreseen certain consequences but did not, took unnecessary risks, or something of the kind.)

In *The Heart of the Matter*, Scobie is sceptical about his own integrity, his lack of sin; he puts it down to moral luck:

“He didn’t drink, he didn’t fornicate, he didn’t even lie, but he never regarded this absence of sin as virtue. When he thought about it at all, he regarded himself as a man in the ranks, the member of an awkward squad, who had no opportunity to break the more serious military rules.” (115)

In his own estimation at that moment, Scobie was ‘virtuous’ simply because he did not have the opportunity to be otherwise. This amounts to a form of circumstantial or situational luck.<sup>10</sup> His ‘clean’ moral status is due to fortunate circumstances, rather than strength of character—that, at least, is what Scobie thinks. Circumstances would change, and so would his moral status. In line with the above quotation, this would entail that Scobie’s character—a not particularly virtuous character (again, in his own estimation)—would finally come to light.

For epistemic reductionists, this would make it a case of *epistemic* luck in the sense outlined in Section 1. Circumstances determine what we get to know about Scobie’s character. They can veil it, so that Scobie seems to be virtuous, or they can unveil it, so that we see him for what he is. However, we should note that this is an ‘impure’ kind of epistemic luck, to say the least. For luck does not merely determine what we come to *know* about Scobie’s *character*, it *also* influences whether Scobie really *acts* in accordance with his (supposedly) sinful character. Luck, in this case, makes a difference to what is actually *done*.<sup>11</sup> The example of the fare dodgers given in Section 1, however, is an example of a

<sup>9</sup> And thus, for Richards, luck may influence how we *ought* to treat someone, “not by changing what he deserves, but by changing the grounds on which we are obliged to judge” (1993: 170).

<sup>10</sup> See footnote 8.

<sup>11</sup> I use the terms ‘character’ and ‘character traits’ without taking an essentialist position on their meaning. In fact, I am more inclined towards the view that there is no such thing in people as a stable character, constant throughout all changes in the circumstances. A contextual view of character seems to me to be much more plausible, which entails diminished plausibility of the epistemic reductionist view that luck’s only influence may be that of revealing the character that the actor already had. For a critique of the notions of character and character traits see, for instance, Harman (2000) and Harman (2001), Merritt (2000), and Ross and Nisbet (1991).

‘purer’ form of epistemic luck. In their case, luck makes no difference at all to what is done, but only to what is known about it.

Epistemic reductionists hold that *all* supposed cases of moral luck in fact have this latter form; they hold that luck determines only whether and to what degree it becomes visible to the outside world what judgement (or condemnation) someone deserves. Both Pete and Mike deserve to be fined, but (ironically) this only comes to light in Mike’s case. Epistemic reductionists forget to differentiate between different types of epistemic luck. They overlook the more complex form, where circumstances beyond the actor’s control (co)determine which of the actor’s character traits finds expression in behaviour—which is what happened in Scobie’s case.

But perhaps epistemic reductionists would disagree that they overlook anything, and maintain instead that the difference between these types of cases just does not matter. Rescher in fact discusses a Scobie-type situation, inquiring after ‘the moral position of the individual who is venial by disposition and inclination, but has the good fortune to be able to stay on the good side of morality because the opportunity for malfeasance never comes his or her way’ (1993: 154). He makes his position quite clear:

“The difference between the would-be thief who lacks opportunity and his cousin who gets and seizes it is not one of moral condition (which, by hypothesis, is the same on both sides); their moral *record* may differ, but their moral *standing* does not. From the vantage point of one who ‘sees all, knows all’ through a vision that penetrates into a person’s depths, the moral status of the two individuals would be the same.” (154)

Similarly, Michael Zimmerman (1993: 226) writes the following about the example of Nazi collaborators and noncollaborators who would have collaborated had they been in the same circumstances the collaborators were in:

“I reject the claim that the noncollaborator deserves no blame. I would argue, on the contrary, that because differential judgment in this case seems unjustified, and because the collaborator deserves blame, therefore the noncollaborator deserves blame also.”<sup>12</sup>

By turning moral judgement into an exclusively virtue-ethical affair, then, epistemic reductionists can consistently hold on to their position even in cases like Scobie’s, where luck matters not just in what we get to know about what he does, but also in what he actually does. The reason is that what is done is completely beside the point from this kind of epistemic reductionist perspective. For Richards (1993: 170), too, luck does not change what anyone deserves; it can only change our grounds for treating him or her a certain way.

But how plausible is this position? It seems reasonable to say, as Rescher does, that ‘[m]orality encompasses more than action’—that it is (also) ‘a matter of inner condition of which actual action is the overt expression’ (1993: 155). But what he in fact maintains is not that there is more to morality than action, but that in essence action has nothing to do with it. The moral judgement anyone deserves is completely independent from what he or

<sup>12</sup> The question then becomes what the noncollaborator is to blame *for*. Zimmerman answers this by distinguishing between ‘P is to blame for more events than P\*’ and ‘P is more to blame than P\*’ (1993: 227); the degree to which one is to blame depends on one’s character, not on the number of events for which one is to blame.



she actually does or has done.<sup>13</sup> The severing of the moral judgement or evaluation of others from their behaviour and actions is the price the epistemic reductionist has to pay for upholding his position in the face of examples like the above.<sup>14</sup> This position also depends on a rather static view of character and the idea of mono-directional causality from character to its expression in action. The next section shows what remains of epistemic reductionism if these assumptions about character are challenged.

#### 4 A Counterexample to Epistemic Reductionism: Scobie's Situational Bad Luck

With the conclusion of the previous section I have already begun to do what I will do with more force here, namely to demonstrate that there are cases of moral luck that cannot plausibly be reduced to cases of epistemic luck—and, I might add, that cannot even *seem* to be reduced in such a manner.

This should not be too hard, for it is not very difficult to think of examples of cases in which a coming-to-light-of-what-was-in-fact-already-the-case is not an issue at all. Luck sometimes plays a role, not just in what we get to know about someone, but also or especially in *who someone is or becomes*. Scobie is a clear example of this—in spite of his own judgement. From a third-person-perspective, it is clear that he did not merely begin to *act* differently under the influence of changing circumstances; circumstantial pressure changed his *identity*.

*The Heart of the Matter* beautifully illustrates, in a way that is only possible in a novel, how Scobie's moral identity becomes dislodged and gradually disassembles. One (mis)step lowers the threshold for the next. The line between his moral status, understood as 'who he is', and his moral status, in the sense of 'who others think he is', is blurred; who others think Scobie is, influences who he is via his *perception* of who others think he is. When you start behaving secretly to avoid the *appearance* that you have something to hide, you behave like someone who has something to hide. Given time, this alone is enough to distort one's self-perception and to ease the transition to really having something to hide. In

<sup>13</sup> Zipursky (2008) distinguishes between two dimensions of responsibility or blameworthiness: 'fault-expressing responsibility', capturing the degree to which an action is expressive of the actor's character, and 'agency-linking responsibility', 'expressing the notion that the degree to which a person is responsible for some event is dependent upon whether that event is a doing, or an action, of that person' (2008: 99) – in short, agency-linking responsibility is about the extent to which something is *some person's act* rather than a mere event, and fault-expressing responsibility is about the extent to which an act is *characteristic* or *typical* for the actor. Now, in Zipursky's terms, epistemic reductionists see only the fault-expressing dimension, while forgetting the agency-linking dimension of responsibility, which (according to Zipursky) can justify different responses depending on the outcome of acts that are the same in terms of fault-expressing responsibility. Whereas Zipursky's convincing defense of moral luck depends on there being an agency-linking aspect to responsibility, my defense will focus on luck's impact on character and identity – not least because of epistemic reductionists' focus on character. Zipursky (2008: 119) suggests that "[t]he most charitable version of the moral luck critic (...) depicts him as agreeing that external performances are the objects of evaluation, but opposing the claim that whether that performance ripens into harm for reasons unrelated to the performance itself should have an impact on our judgment of the performer." I believe, however, that this charitable interpretation does not apply to the epistemic reductionists discussed in this article, because they see character as the object of evaluation.

<sup>14</sup> Enoch and Marmor (2007: 431) mention another consequence: "A character-based theory of blame and responsibility straightforwardly entails that there is neither consequential nor circumstantial moral luck (...). But character-based theorists have a price to pay for this elegant result when it comes to constitutive luck. For it follows from their view (...) that you are responsible for your morally relevant character traits just in case they reflect badly on your morally relevant character traits, which they trivially always do. On this view (...) you are responsible for all your morally relevant character traits, regardless of whether they are or ever have been in any interesting way under your control."



other words: the idea that a mono-directional causal relationship exists between character and action, that character always precedes action and is its underlying cause, is mistaken. Social-psychological research has repeatedly shown that just as often action precedes ‘character’, identity and self-image. Especially in novel situations in which we cannot rely on any ‘script’ telling us how to act, our action is largely conditioned by the situation, and we consequently interpret ourselves as the kind of person that acts in such a way. This self-description, in turn, may lead to repetition of such acts in similar or different situations. Thus, a single action and our consequent self-interpretation may form the basis for new dispositions. (See, for instance, Baumeister and Vohs [eds.], 2007, vol. 2, lemmas ‘Self-Attribution Process’ and ‘Self-Perception Theory’, and Franzoi (2006), 182ff.)

The concept of character has been the subject of fierce debate among psychologists for some time now, but even without appealing to (social-)psychological research that problematizes the notion altogether, we may observe that a person’s ‘character’ is not a fixed given, and that it depends strongly on the context in which someone finds himself. If Scobie had not been stationed in West-Africa, but remained in England with his wife, his life would have—and *he* would have—developed unimaginably differently. The ultimate example of bad luck that unhinges Scobie’s moral identity is his initial non-appointment as successor to the superintendent, that eventually (what irony!) is inverted into his appointment. Had Scobie been promoted in the first instance, Louise would not have wanted to go to South-Africa, Scobie would not have needed to borrow money from Yusef, and so on.

But things *did* happen this way, and Scobie *did* find himself in an environment soaked with corruption, in a climate that in most people not born in it does not bring out the best, and he *was* confronted with possibilities (trials, tests, temptations) that contributed to the crumbling of his moral integrity. This is not a matter of ineluctable determination by circumstances. But circumstances stimulate the development of certain traits of character or personality, and certain dispositions; they lure, invite to certain ways of acting, bring to the foreground certain aspects of a person and push other aspects into the background.

A person never deserves all the credit (or all the blame) for his or her moral status (in whatever sense of the word); herein lies the reality of moral luck. Situational luck can play a role in two ways: chance circumstances may expose what is already there (and they may do so in two ways, as we have seen), but they can also partly shape a person and thereby make a real—more than epistemic – difference.<sup>15</sup>

## 5 A Second Counterexample to Epistemic Reductionism: Resultant Luck

Perhaps you are an epistemic reductionist and (however unlikely this may be) still unconvinced that there are cases of moral luck that are not reducible to instances of epistemic luck. Let me then have one last go at it, and turn from circumstantial luck to resultant luck. An example of this kind of luck will show that the failure of the epistemic reduction of moral luck is not peculiar to instances of situational luck.

<sup>15</sup> An anonymous reviewer rightly pointed out that there is a difference between dramatic circumstances that may radically change or even break down a person’s identity, and the ordinary circumstances that continuously support and (subtly) change one’s identity. Although this lies beyond the confines of the present article, it would be interesting to investigate the relevance of this difference to the problem of moral luck. When do we consider the role of circumstances important enough to speak of circumstantial (or situational) moral luck? Arguably, we are always the subjects of situational (good or bad) luck, but this simply becomes clearest when the circumstances are more dramatic, and therefore we are more prone in such cases to speak of situational luck (whereas here the difference may be merely epistemic!).

Donna Dickenson (2003: 7) points out ‘a recurring theme’ in her book, namely “that the extent of outcome luck [Dickenson’s term for ‘resultant luck’; AS] has been underestimated by philosophers, and that, although it occurs constantly in clinical practice, medical ethicists (and the clinicians whom they hope to assist) do not always recognize the paradox.” For Dickenson moral luck is a reality. She presents a number of examples of outcome luck in the medical sphere, but because they are rather long, I will use a hypothetical example, designed to show where epistemic reductionists go wrong. As in Dickenson’s real-life examples, risk plays a crucial role.

Imagine the following situation: a patient is brought in with severe internal injuries, resulting from a car crash. With standard treatment, the patient will live but be severely handicapped. One surgeon, however, knows of an experimental treatment that has not been tried on humans before. It seems promising, but the conditions for success or failure are not fully known. Failure may mean the death of the patient, who is unconscious and cannot consent to the treatment.<sup>16</sup> Immediate action is necessary. The surgeon performs the experimental operation and succeeds. The patient recovers fully and suffers no impairments. He is eternally grateful to the surgeon.

Of course, things might just as well have gone wrong. It is not difficult to imagine the difference between the newspaper headlines: just substitute ‘Doctor Death’ for ‘Medical Heroine’. Epistemic reductionists would explain the (likely) difference between people’s judgements by pointing out that in case of success, people do not get to know the risk the surgeon took, whereas in the case of failure, this is plain for all to see. In other words: they would reduce moral luck in outcomes to epistemic luck.

So far, they have a point. But what about those who are well-informed from the start—the hospital staff, for instance, who knew that the operation was highly risky? Would their moral judgement be the same no matter the outcome? Probably not. It is virtually impossible to judge as harshly about the risk a person took when everything turned out fine, as when things actually went wrong. Epistemic reductionists might say this is a failure of rationality on our part; that although we have the same information, the emotional effect of success or failure clouds our judgement, obscuring or highlighting the risk taken by the surgeon. Epistemic luck is then not so much a matter of what we know, but of the strength or weakness of the relation between what we know and the moral judgement we make.

Although things could be said against this, let us grant this to the epistemic reductionists. Even then, I will argue, there will be moral luck involved in a case like this that cannot be reduced to epistemic luck. This becomes clear when we consider the consequences of success or failure for the surgeon in question. Because of the psychological fact that she will think about herself differently depending on the success or failure of the procedure, an effect that is reinforced by the reactions she will get from her colleagues and the wider public, she will not be the same person regardless of what happens. In case of failure, she will be someone who gambled with a person’s life and lost—to her own mind a murderer, perhaps.<sup>17</sup> In case of success, she may still have some doubts, but she will also be the person who had the guts to try something new and the skill to pull it off. I’m stating it somewhat crudely, but a difference in self-perception of this kind will probably arise.

<sup>16</sup> So (respect for) autonomy and informed consent are not at issue here. The surgeon has to decide – we can assume that both treatments require instantaneous action, so that there is also no time to consult relatives of the patient.

<sup>17</sup> She would certainly experience what Williams (1981) called ‘agent regret’, a form of regret characteristic of someone whose actions somehow contributed to the coming about of something bad or undesirable. Though agent regret is ‘by no means restricted to *voluntary agency*’ (1981: 27–28), it cannot be separated from remorse and moral (self-)evaluation.

So, outcome luck changes the identity—including the *moral* identity—of the surgeon. Her moral status changes, depending on the outcome of the procedure. To insist, as epistemic reductionists might want to do, on a notion of moral status that relates purely to what was strictly under the agent's control—a notion of moral status that becomes completely divorced from the way a person is perceived by others, a person's self-perception, and a person's identity—seems utterly unconvincing. The way this episode is taken up by the surgeon, the place it acquires in her biographical narrative, depends on outcome luck; the same holds true for her future character development. Thereby, moral luck proves to be a much more deeply influential phenomenon than epistemic reductionists would have us believe.

## 6 Concluding Remarks

The epistemic reduction of *all* (supposed) cases of moral luck fails, both because of an implausible separation of moral evaluations of character from those of actions, and because the impact of (moral) luck on personal and moral identity is ignored.

It is worth noticing the underlying cause of the latter fault. Epistemic reductionists hold, in Statman's words, that "luck does not affect one's *deserts* but only our *knowledge* of them", because they focus on *single actions, retrospectively*. The actions in question are taken out of the context of a person's (character) development and divorced from their future 'Wirkungsgeschichte'. This allows them to see actions as mere expressions of eternally fixed characters, and 'outcomes' or 'results' as nothing more than indicators of what was already there, regardless of these outcomes. I do not deny that *something* was there. In the case of the surgeon, a certain risk was taken—but what risk, how great a risk exactly? Are we able, *in retrospect*, to assess such a risk objectively? Moreover, are we able, *in retrospect*, to weigh it against the possible loss or gain, once the loss or gain is already realized?

Something else was also there before the act; neither Scobie nor the surgeon were characterless before they acted. But our characters are always in development, never fixed; and it would be wrong to assume that we have a fully determinate character before any action we take. Part of our character acquires shape only when we act, not before, and depending on the consequences of our actions.

On any plausible view of human nature and human actions, then, moral luck is a reality, not an illusion.

**Acknowledgements** This article is based on a Dutch article Schinkel (2008); I thank Bert Musschenga, Jan Boersema, and other members of the Blaise Pascal Institute, as well as Kees Schinkel for their insightful comments on earlier versions of this Dutch article. Thanks are also due to two anonymous reviewers for ETMP, whose comments were very helpful in revising the first version of the present article, and to an anonymous reviewer for the (2008 conference of the) British Society for Ethical Theory, who also provided constructive criticism on an earlier version of the present article.

## References

- Athanassoulis N (2005) Morality, moral luck and responsibility: Fortune's web. Palgrave MacMillan, Basingstoke
- Baumeister RF, Vohs KD (eds) (2007) Encyclopedia of social psychology, Vol. 2. Sage Publications, Los Angeles

- Card C (1996) *The Unnatural Lottery: Character and Moral Luck*. Temple University Press, Philadelphia
- Concepcion DW (2002) Moral luck, control, and the bases of desert. *J Value Inq* 36:455–461
- Coyne MU (1985) Moral luck? *J Value Inq* 19:319–325
- Dickenson D (2003) *Risk and luck in medical ethics*. Polity Press, Cambridge
- Enoch D, Marmor A (2007) The case against moral luck. *Law Philos* 26:405–436
- Franzoi SL (2006) *Social psychology*. McGraw-Hill, New York
- Greene G (1971) *The heart of the matter*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth [1948]
- Harman G (2000) The nonexistence of character traits. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society New Series* 223–226
- Harman G (2001) Virtue ethics without character traits. In: Byrne A, Stalnaker R, Wedgwood R (eds) *Essays on ethics and metaphysics for Judith Jarvis Thomson*. MIT Press, Cambridge (MA), pp 117–127
- Merritt M (2000) Virtue ethics and situationist personality psychology. *Ethical Theory Moral Pract* 3(4):365–383
- Nagel T (1983) [1976] “Moral Luck”, In: Nagel T. (ed) *Mortal Questions*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983 (first edition 1979), 24–38
- Nussbaum M (1995) *The fragility of Goodness: Luck and ethics in Greek tragedy and philosophy*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge [1986]
- Pritchard D (2004) Epistemic luck. *J Philos Res* 29:193–222
- Pritchard D (2005) *Epistemic luck*. Oxford University Press, Oxford 2005
- Pritchard D (2006) Moral and epistemic luck. *Metaphilosophy* 37(1):1–25 January 2006
- Rescher N (1993) “Moral Luck”, in Statman (ed.) (1993), 141–166
- Richards N (1993) [1986] “Luck and Desert”, in Statman (ed.) (1993), 167–180
- Ross L, Nisbet RE (1991) *The person and the situation: Perspectives of social psychology*. Temple University Press, Philadelphia
- Schinkel A (2008) “Moreel Toeval”. In: Musschenga A, Siersema B (eds) *De Utopie van de Maakbaarheid*, Ten Have, Kampen, 136–157
- Statman D (1993) “Introduction”, in Statman (ed.) (1993), 1–34
- Statman D (1993) *Moral luck*. State University of New York Press, New York (red.)
- Walker (Coyne) MU (1993) [1991] “Moral luck and the virtues of impure agency”, in Statman (ed.) (1993), 235–250
- Williams B (1981) [1976] “Moral Luck”, in Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973–1980*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1981, 20–39
- Zimmerman MJ (1993) [1987] “Luck and moral responsibility”, in Statman (ed.) (1993), 217–233
- Zipursky BC (2008) Two dimensions of responsibility in crime, tort, and moral luck. *Theor Inq in Law* 9 (1):97–137 January 2008